

St James United Church

Message for May 22, 2022

Sixth Sunday of Easter



“The Spirit’s Inclusive Vision”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Galatians 3:27-28; John 14:23-29; Acts 16:9-15; “We Are a River” from *The Sage’s Tao Te Ching: Ancient Advice for the Second Half of Life* by William Martin (a free verse interpretation of Lao Tzu)

As I begin to speak today, I need to tell you that there are some heavy thoughts in my message, ideas about race and gender, reproductive rights among others. Given that we celebrated Cole's baptism earlier today, some may question why I would broach these topics, yet I broach them in part because we celebrated a baptism and what we profess it means. The United Church is one of many denominations that baptizes babies and not just older children and adults. Why? Because we believe baptism is about what God is doing for us, not a sign that we've made a decision about God, but rather that from the beginning God made a decision about us, creating each and every one of us in God's image and likeness, babies as loved by God as adults, not for who they will grow up to be but who they are right now. The same goes for all genders, races, sexualities, abilities. Paul voiced this as it applies to baptism in his letter to the Galatians. He wrote that the categories we see each other as belonging to, male or female, Jew or Gentile, enslaved or free, are no longer to be a way for us to judge or harm each other, that baptism reveals how we are one in Christ.

I hear an echo of this in Lao Tzu's words (via William Martin). On one level they're about the journey from this life to the next, but I also hear competing social visions, one in which we see ourselves as individuals climbing a mountain and one where we're a part of a whole, raindrops in a river going to the sea. The second vision is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. His assurance that God dwells with us is not about individuals, but God dwelling with and through everyone. That should shape how we see and treat each other but events in the US in the last couple of weeks tell me that it doesn't, at least not for everyone. That worries me, because as much as we are not the US, we're not isolated from them either. Movements there influence us here.

Take for example the mass-shooting in Buffalo and the revelation that the young man who did it was motivated by a false belief that white people are being replaced by Black, Latinx and Asian people. It sounds like an odd notion, but he believed it just the same. Called the “Great Replacement”, this theory has been linked to other mass shooting events, and not just in the US, but in New Zealand and elsewhere in the world. We like to believe we don't think this way in Canada but among the organizers of the Freedom Convoy were those using replacement rhetoric. You'd think people of faith would stand against this but there are some, like Christian nationalists, who fear the US, or Canada, or wherever it may be, will no longer be a “Christian” nation as long as immigrant keep coming into the country. I wish I could dismiss them outright, but did you know that more Muslims have been killed in Islamophobia-inspired attacks in Canada than in any other G7 nation? You can see why I'm worried.

Likewise the leaked opinion about Roe v. Wade in the US has been on my mind. My concern again is rooted in Paul's inclusive vision, the issue for me is less about reproduction than it is gender equality. In 1980, the United Church acknowledged the complexity of competing rights, affirming the sanctity of life while upholding that the decisions a woman makes about her own body must be her own. I echo that nuance, pro-choice even as I pray that the need for anyone to make that choice be as rare as can be. For me it's about supporting each woman given her circumstances. But too often underneath the positions people hold are assumptions about gender, a percentage of those trying to roll back reproductive rights also questioning other rights, including the right of women to work outside the home. And the amendment that Roe v. Wade interpreted is the same that was used to bring about racial desegregation, affirm same-sex marriage, seek transgender rights. There is concern of a domino effect, hard won rights undermined one by one, as pushed by those motivated by a faith-based agenda.

Like I said, heavy thoughts. Yet despite all of that I trust in the famous statement of Rev. Dr. King that the arc of history bends toward justice. Why? Because in John 14, Jesus promised to send the Companion, the Spirit, to remind us of everything he said and so among other things to empower us to create more equitable and just communities à la Galatians. It may seem a bit obscure, but I see this in Acts, as Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia asking for help. As you heard, Paul and his friends go and share their message, but not with a man but a group of women, among them Lydia who is baptized along with her whole household. Some question why we never hear of the man in Paul's vision again. I wonder if that's the point. What if Paul filtered his vision through gender bias, and the man he thought he saw was actually Lydia all along? Perhaps that experience inspired his belief that we are all truly one in Christ.

Thankfully the Spirit still inspires us toward that vision. I see this in a couple of United Church examples. The first is in regard to another Lydia, Lydia Gruchy, the first woman ordained in the United Church. It was in 1936 and it took years of advocacy. That we began ordaining women so long ago is a point of pride but should be cautiously so. Few women became ministers until the '70s and '80s. It didn't help that they had to give up ministry if they married, a rule enforced until 1964. We now have good balance between genders in ministry but the length of time it took reminds us how achieving equal rights takes concerted effort. It also means overcoming bias, something the Spirit helps us to do, often despite ourselves. This happened in 1988 when after months of study on the proposal regarding sexuality and ministry, it looked like we would uphold our ban on ordaining lesbians and gay men. But the Spirit had another idea and after people shared their experiences of prejudice, the commissioners voted 3-1 that "all persons, regardless of sexual orientation... be considered for ordered ministry." As more and more denominations have made the same decision, it's clear that we made the right call.

And I pray that we keep doing so. As I shared at the beginning, heavy concerns have been on my heart these weeks. But they should be as we seek to listen to the Spirit in issues that we face. I take comfort that I'm not alone in this but part of a church that wrestles with important questions, part of a church that worries about the injustices people face, part of a church that seeks a more equitable world. I also take comfort in the promise of Jesus to send the Spirit to remind us of what he taught as we do just that. I pray that we keep remembering. Amen.